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## RICHARD STRAUSS'S "SALOME."

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN.

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A NEW opera that, within little more than a year of its production, has invaded most of the principal opera-houses of Europe, yet one that possesses no spectacular or scenic attractiveness whatsoever, and that sets at defiance every traditional requirement of the operagoer, would seem to have established some claim to a rather searching critical consideration. In this singular case is Richard Strauss's "Salome," which is to be performed at the Metropolitan Opera-House, New York, this month for the first time in America. Not since Wagner's later music-dramas set all æsthetic Europe by the ears has so intense and wide an agitation been caused by any new work for the lyric stage. "Salome," which is based upon the one-act drama of Oscar Wilde, was produced at the Dresden Royal Opera on December 9th, 1905. It was received with unbounded enthusiasm—there were thirty-eight recalls for the singers, the conductor and the composer, when the curtain fell after the brief performance (the work lasts but an hour and a half). Since then, it has traversed the operatic stages of the Continent in a manner little short of triumphal. It has been jubilantly acclaimed as an epoch-making masterwork, and virulently denounced as a subversive and preposterous aberration: yet it has everywhere been eagerly listened to and clamorously discussed.

It may be serviceable, before considering Strauss's music, to regard briefly the remarkable drama of Wilde from which it is derived. The story of Salome, her dance before Herod, her connection with the life of John the Baptist, has inspired innumerable painters, dramatists and poets; yet its most powerful and hauntingly imaginative setting is, doubtless, the one-act prose drama of Wilde. The play was written in French for Sarah Bernhardt,

and Wilde expected that she would produce it and enact the part of the heroine; but when the drama was performed in Paris at the *Nouveau Théâtre* on October 28th, 1896, Mme. Lina Munte, and not Mme. Bernhardt, played the part of *Salome*. Two years before the Paris performance, an English translation of the play, made by Lord Alfred Douglas, was published, with highly characteristic illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley; and this English version was privately performed in London on May 10th, 1905.

It has been said that Wilde in writing his play was strongly influenced by Gustave Flaubert's tale, "*Hérodias*," in the collection "*Trois Contes*"; for Flaubert is one of the many who, before Wilde, recounted in prose their versions and perversions of the ancient Hebrew chronicle. However that may be—and the hypothesis seems plausible enough—Wilde's chief departure from the Scriptural and legendary originals in the matter of plot consists in imputing to Salome a consuming and insatiable passion for the Prophet, and in making the request for his head in payment for her dancing a voluntary one, unprompted by her mother Herodias. Salome would kiss the lips of John; and, her passionate importunities being repulsed by him, she demands his head, that she may bestow upon his dead lips the kisses which she had burned to give them in life. Wilde has still further altered and amplified the traditional story by bringing the figure of Herod far more prominently into the action. The Tetrarch is shown as harboring an ill-concealed and growing passion for his niece and stepdaughter, Salome—a passion which is turned to horrified loathing at the close of the drama, when, at the sight of the enraptured princess caressing the severed head of John, he distractedly commands her death.

Whatever opinion one may hold concerning the subject-matter of Wilde's play—and this is not the occasion to indulge in the luxury of ethical appraisement—there can be no question of the potency of the work as dramatic literature. At the least, few will deny the maleficent power and the imaginative intensity with which the conception, such as it is, is carried through, from its vivid beginning to its climactic and truly appalling close. Passion and terror are its chief emotional accents—passion and terror, and the note of an overshadowing destiny: these are its key-notes. It has, in a conspicuous and singular degree, the true fate-burdened atmosphere of classic tragedy—indeed, a persistent

appreciator might even find in it an enforcement of the antique tradition of expiation. It might justly bear for its motto a paraphrase of the cry of the protagonist in a contemporary tragedy, equally charged with the spirit of disaster and sudden fate: "O Princess, there is no evil done upon the world that the wind does not bring back to the feet of him who made it!" One notes the insistent use of such vivid and modern symbols as wind and shadow, employed as a kind of inverted and aphoristic Chorus. Thus for Herod, crime-haunted and lustful, the wind is full of sinister omens—he hears it in "something that is like the beating of vast wings"; the wind is "icy"; again it is hot, and chokes him. The moon, to him, "is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked, too . . . the clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them. . . . Does she not reel like a drunken woman?" To the young soldier Narraboth, in love with Salome, the moon, on the other hand, "is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little doves for feet." To the apprehensive page, who foresees direful results from his friend's infatuation, she is "like a woman rising from a tomb. . . . You would fancy she were looking for dead things." While to Salome, before she has become inflamed by the sight of John, the moon is "cold and chaste. . . . She has a virgin's beauty." One cannot but think, after all this, of Shelley's moon that was

"like a dying lady lean and pale,  
Who totters forth, wrapped in a gauzy veil,  
Out of her chamber, led by the insane  
And feeble wanderings of her fading brain."

One must not forget to give due credit to the admirably poetic and eloquent English translation of Wilde's text made by Lord Alfred Douglas, with its curious and striking mixture of the verbal style of the King James version and something of the rhythmic cadence of M. Maeterlinck—a sufficiently odd, yet influential, compound.

What, now, of the music that Strauss has contrived as a setting for this singular *mélange* of lust, piety and exaltation, this horrible, flagrant, yet beautiful and insinuating play?

Strauss completed the score of "Salome" at Berlin in June,

1905. It is numbered Opus 54, and follows the "Symphonia Domestica" in the succession of his published works. It is his most unequivocal and venturesome effort. In deliberate complexity of structure and audacity of procedure it outdistances any of his previous achievements, either symphonic or operatic—it will be recalled that Strauss has produced two other works in lyrico-dramatic form: "Guntram" (Opus 25) and "Feuersnot" (Opus 50). In polyphonic tissue—the interweaving of different melodic strands—the music is not so dense and full as the "Domestica" or "Ein Heldenleben"; but in harmonic radicalism and in elaborateness and intricacy of orchestration it is his most extreme performance. His use of dissonance—or, more precisely, of sheer cacophony—is as deliberate and persistent as it is unabashed. The entire score is a harmonic *tour de force* of the most amazing character—a practically continuous texture of new and daring combinations of tone. At more than one place the orchestra is literally divided against itself, and thunders simultaneously in two violently antagonistic keys; or the orchestra as a whole will be playing unconcernedly in A-flat major, while the singer intones valiantly a phrase in A (natural) minor. In spite, however, of its staggering novelty of effect, the music is conceived, so far as its relation to the drama is concerned, upon the lines laid down by Wagner in theory and practice. That is to say, "Salome" is a true music-drama; for the music is always and unswervingly at the service of the dramatic situation, enforcing and italicizing the significance of the text and action. Wagner himself has not wrought a more consistent and uncompromising score, considered as a dramatic commentary and exposition. The Wagnerian system of typical themes is faithfully and ingeniously exploited, and is made to serve an illustrative purpose that never flags in explicitness and detail. The score is full of every variety of tone-painting, broadly delineative as well as extravagantly minute. It is all part of the enormous and nonchalant ingenuity that has contrived the executive side of the work—that has found, for example, no more difficulty in setting the rhymeless and metreless prose of Wilde's drama than in handling the prodigious orchestra for which the music is scored.

The observer stands continually in amaze at the unconcerned ease, the technical mastery, with which structural difficulties and complexities of a truly appalling nature are invited and over-

come—especially and most strikingly in the matter of instrumentation. Strauss has scored in this work for an orchestra of colossal proportions, and he has chosen to handle it in the most blithely audacious way. It is not every music-maker who dares to devise his orchestral schemes with the serene disregard for tradition and feasibility displayed by the composer of “Salome”—to require, for example, his violas and ’cellos to play parts immemorially delegated to the violins; to make his double-basses cavort with the agility and the abandon of clarinets; to write unheard-of and nerve-destroying figures for the kettle-drums, and to demand of the trombonist that he transform his instrument into a flute: yet Strauss, on almost every page of his score, makes some such demand upon his executants. It is precisely, though, in the matter of its orchestral treatment that the music of “Salome” is most noteworthy and most admirable. Viewed purely from the standpoint of instrumentation—the disposition of the musical idea among the multiple voices of the orchestra—this score is an indisputable marvel. Never has this sonorous and many-tongued modern instrument been so resourcefully, so daringly, so ingeniously employed. Such skill in the contrivance and juxtaposition of instrumental *timbres*, so superbly sure and masterful a grasp upon the mechanism of the most formidable artistic medium in existence, is as astounding as it is unparalleled in musical literature.

It is when one turns from the bewildering magnificence of its orchestral investiture to a consideration of the actual substance of the music, the fundamental ideas which lie within the dazzling instrumental envelope, that it is possible to realize why, for many of his most determined admirers, this work marks a pathetic decline from the standard set by Strauss in his former achievements. It is not that the music is often cacophonous in the extreme, that its ugliness ranges from that which is merely harsh and unlovely to that which is brutally and deliberately hideous; for we have not to learn anew, in these days of post-Wagnerian emancipation, that a dramatic exigency justifies any possible musical means that will appropriately express it: to-day we cheerfully concede that, when a character in music-drama tells another character that “his body is like the body of a leper, like a plastered wall where vipers crawl . . . like a whited sepulchre, full of loathsome things,” the sentiment may not be uttered in

music of Mendelssohnian sweetness and placidity. What one objects to and grieves over in "Salome" is not that the music is often hideous, with a hideousness that is unhallowed and unashamed, but that in its hideousness it is so empty, so inarticulate, so abortive, so lacking in point, in grip, in saliency, in vividness of denotement—in a word, that it is so ineffective. To be brief, it does not speak. Time and again the thing intended simply does not "come off." There is possible in music a kind of ugliness, a kind of deliberate cacophony, that is expressive and significant—that speaks, that is eloquent. Strauss himself has achieved such an effect in that wonderful and heart-shaking passage in his "Don Quixote" which depicts the mental disintegration of the deluded knight; or, again, in the unforgettable battle-music in "Ein Heldenleben." There is also possible in music another order of dissonant effect, which may be achieved (to recall Mr. Whistler's luminous phrase) by the simple expedient of "sitting on the keyboard": an effect that is obviously possible without either inspiration or artistry. And it is upon this order of futile and afflicting expression that Strauss, for reasons which need not here be explored, relies in much of the music of "Salome." There are moments, all too brief, when the thought of the composer, in the intenser portions of the drama, touches the rim of a potent and moving conception; but far more often he is either elaborately commonplace—with a commonplaceness that is sometimes amusingly suggestive of Massenet at his worst—or he is painfully and fatuously shrill.

For those who treasure in their minds, with thanksgiving for their indisputable beauty and power, the nobler inventions of the genius who once gave us a "Zarathustra," a "Don Quixote," a "Heldenleben," a "Tod und Verklärung," and a sheaf of incomparable songs, this master of music must seem to have fallen upon evil days.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.